

Texts and Traditions Warped and Distorted

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The academic world, particularly in the regions of religion, history and sociology has witnessed in recent years the phenomenon alluded to in the title above. Proliferation of learned studies attempted on several areas of these disciplines, quite often calculated to serve specific interests and to confirm and establish pre-conceived notions, has led to this lamentable catastrophe in scholarship. Incomplete and incomprehensive studies of the area under survey and inaccurate translations of texts in languages other than English have been, among other things, the cause of alarming and slanderous generalizations. Unwarranted and unjustifiable interpretations of their contents have often added to the intensity of such crimes. Even in the world of scholarship, as much as in the fields of science and technology, when findings of today provide the foundations for the theories and actions of tomorrow, it seems unjust and uncharitable not to sound a note of warning in such dubious and uncertain areas.

In Sri Lankan studies, a point of considerable interest from the field of history which in recent years has become the basis of many learned generalizations is a statement which occurs in the Mahāvamsa, the Great Chronicle of Sri Lanka. It relates to the war of Duṭṭhagāmaṇī [Mhv.ch.xxv]. Many historians and sociologists, taking excerpts from this as their gospel, have given kaleidoscopic interpretations with regard to diverse themes like the moral calibre of Buddhist arahants, Sinhala nationalism and religion and politics in Sri Lanka.

Citing this chapter in the Mahāvamsa, Dr. Walpola Rahula [History of Buddhism in Ceylon, Colombo, 1956. p.227 f.] says: "A story in the Mahavamsa [Mhv. xxv. 98-112] shows that arahants were not free from religious and national prejudices. Reference was made earlier to how Duṭṭhagāmaṇī who was repenting over the destruction of many thousands of human lives in the war was consoled

by some arahants. It is useful to quote here the relevant passage verbatim: "When the arahants in Piyangudīpa knew his thought they sent eight arahants to comfort the king...therefore cast away care from thy heart, O ruler of men. Thus exhorted by them the king took comfort." But it is absolutely against the spirit of the Buddha's teaching. Destruction of life, in any form, for any purpose, even for the establishment, protection or propagation of Buddhism, can never be justified according to the teaching of the Buddha. The most amusing thing is the ethico-mathematical calculation of one and a half human beings killed in the war. We do not know whether the arahants of the second century B.C. ever expressed such an erroneous view. But we can have no reasonable doubt that the celebrated author of the Mahavamsa, who lived in the fifth century, did write these verses in the great national chronicle which proves that the learned Mahatheras and other responsible people at that time considered this statement to be worthy of arahants, and so included it in the chronicle. They seem to have held that arahants justified killing for the perpetuation of religion." [loc.cit.].

There is no doubt that it was less the intention of Rahula to comment on the justifiability or otherwise of Duṭṭhagāmaṇī's war than to gauge the ethico-moral calibre of the arahants. Nevertheless, he has thereby thrown open the flood-gates for the release of ceaseless gushing comments by historians and sociologists who would have invariably judged different if they had had the benefit of a fuller, less one-sided investigation. We shall pick up some of these comments for review in due course.

What interests us at the moment is to point out the existence of yet another record of Duṭṭhagāmaṇī's post-war moods. Rahula has either not laid hands on this or chosen not to comment on it for reasons better known to him. Both from the point of antiquity as well as reliability, this version which is recorded in the *Sumaṅgalavilāsinī* [DA.II. 640], the Commentary to the *Dīgha Nikāya*, must necessarily get equal credence, if not a great deal more. It would be agreed that it is unnecessary to labour here to establish the point. The tradition, as recorded

in the Sumaṅgalavilāsinī, is as follows:

"He [Duṭṭhagāmaṇī] having conquered thirty two provincial Tamil rulers [*dvattiṃsa damaḷa-rājāno vijitvā*] was appointed king in the city of Anuradhapura. And consequent on this, he was so elated that for a month he could not sleep for joy. Thereupon, he sent word to the community of monks, informing them of his lack of sleep. They advised him to take up the observance of the *uposatha* [i.e.the observance of the eight precepts or *aṭṭhaṅgasīla*]. He took upon himself the observance of the *uposatha*. The community of monks sent eight bhikkhus versed in the Abhidhamma, instructing them to recite the text of the Citta-yamaka in the presence of the king. They went up to him, and requesting him to lie reclining in his couch, commenced their recital. The king, as he listened to the recital, fell asleep. The monks, insisting that the king be not disturbed from his sleep, went their way. The following day, at sunrise, the king woke up and not seeing the monks in his presence, inquired as to their whereabouts. He was informed that they went away on realising that the king had fallen asleep." [Translated into English by the author from DA.II. p.640].

One cannot fail in this context to be impressed by the fact that Duṭṭhagāmaṇī evinces a sense of triumph rather than one of remorse after his conquest of the Tamil rulers [*dvattiṃsa-damaḷa-rājāno vijitvā Anurādhapure pattābhiseko tuṭṭha-somanassena māsaṃ niddaṃ na labhi*. Ibid.]. It is obviously the sense of achievement in the mind of one who knew what he was pursuing. It was not a line of impulsive action, according to evidence available, that Duṭṭhagāmaṇī followed in his war against the Tamil ruler Elara, but rather one of deliberate, calculated action to which he appears to have been driven by a series of circumstances of increasing harshness.

On the other hand, the Mahāvamsa account makes the king lament over the loss of life in the war that he waged [*kataṃ akkhohiṇighātaṃ saranto na sukhaṃ labhi*. Mhv.ch. xxv. v.103]. Literary sources, both classical and popular, show that

Duṭṭhagāmaṇī had every reason to be angry at the way in which the invaders of the island from time to time were wrecking Buddhist institutions and damaging Buddhist monuments which were very dear to the people and which they held in high esteem. The cultural attainments which the people of Sri Lanka had reached up to that time were essentially through the Buddhist religion which had come to them from North India. Duṭṭhagāmaṇī as the leader of the vast majority of people of the land, who were both Sinhala by nationality and Buddhist by their religious convictions, was by duty bound to defend the religion and its entire setup. History records that the people who were living here gave their name to the land in which they lived. Thus the land of the Sinhalas was Sinhala. Even the Chinese traveller monk Fa Hsien [journeying through India during the years AD 399 to 414] who came to Sri Lanka circa. fifth century A.D. seems to refer to Sri Lanka as the country of Singhala [See A Record Of Buddhist Kingdoms - James Legge / Munshiram Manoharlal, New Delhi, 1991.p.100], implying the meaning ' the Country of the Lion.' In the same work, he translates the name of this country into Chinese as Shih-tse-kuo which means the ' the land of the lion-progeny '.

On the other hand, Hiuēn Tsiang whose travels over India spread from 629 to 645 [but had not the opportunity to visit Sri Lanka], refers repeatedly to this country as Sinhala, i.e. Seng-chia-lo. [See Buddhist Records Of The Western World - Samuel Beal / Munshiram Manoharlal, New Delhi, 1983. ii . p. 206, 235, 240 f.]. Referring to the island of Sinhala, he seems to use the Chinese characters Chi-sse-tseu [Ibid. i. p. 188].

Taking the Mahāvamsa itself which has been the basic source book of Rahula in his analysis and assessment of Duṭṭhagāmaṇī's war, one has to note the sacrilegious acts of the invaders recorded therein [*Thūpādisu asakkāraṃ karonte damiḷe tadā*. Mhv. ch. xxiii, v.9]. The invader was looked upon as being offensive because of the damage he was causing to the cultural monuments of the Buddhists which were of extreme religious significance to them. This evidence of the Mahāvamsa cited above, one would consider as belonging to the category

of classical tradition.

Besides this, there is also a wealth of literary evidence coming to us from the popular tradition. The *Rasavāhinī* [ed. Kirialle Nanavimala, p.198] makes specific mention of the acts of vandalism perpetrated by the alien group referred to above. Recounting these atrocities, the *Rasavāhinī* says that the Tamils in Sri Lanka at that time were cutting down Bodhi trees, and destroying by diverse means the stupas and the images of the Buddha.

*Laṅkāyaṃ Daṃilā 'dāni
chindantā bodhipādape
thūpe ca paṭimāyo ca
vināsesuṃ anekadhā.*

The report goes on to say further that the pious and gentle Buddhist monks would have their robes torn off and that they would flee in terror, seeking protection. *Buddhaputtā mahānāgā bhikkhavo sīlasaṃvutā acchinnacīvarā bhītā caranti saraṇesino.*

It is the very nature of these acts of theirs by which the Damilas in this country came to be identified as a hostile group. The Buddhists as a group had no hostility whatsoever against the Hindu faith as is sometimes made out to be. Arasaratnam, for instance, says: "The story emphasizes that Duttugemunu was a champion of Buddhism and fought to re-establish this faith and extirpate Hindu heresy supported by the Tamil rulers ". [Ceylon by S. Arasaratnam, in *Modern Nations in Historical Perspective*. 1964, p.52]. This is nothing more than a convenient, but a treacherously mischievous generalization, unbecoming of anything which one would call scholarship, which is far from the truth and which does not accord with the facts of recorded evidence.

This hostile attitude of the invader was something that repeated itself throughout the history of Sri Lanka. Speaking of the Polonnaruva period [of

history in Sri Lanka], Paranavitana says: "The Buddhist religion suffered great calamities during the Cola occupation, and the extensive monasteries which flourished at Anuradhapura and other places in the tenth century were abandoned. The dagabas were broken into, and the valuables deposited in their relic-chambers were plundered" [UHC.Vol. I. Part II. p. 563].

It has been very characteristic of Buddhism in general, in every land into which it found its way, that it absorbed and assimilated, rather than crushed and smothered, the indigenous cultural and religious elements with necessary adaptation and modification.

In Sri Lanka, as is seen from literary and archaeological evidence available, most of the discernible traces of culture and civilization seem to emerge, dating after the arrival of Buddhism in the island. The bulk of the native population of the island who, for the most part, had descended from the North Indian emigrants, appear to have had their cultural stimulation and inspiration from the new religion. Thus it became the very life-blood of the people and it would therefore have been looked upon as being suicidal to disregard or not to pay adequate heed to this threat to its continuity and well-being.

Consequent action in this direction to safeguard the birth- right of a nation is not to be mistaken or misrepresented as religious intolerance or religious persecution. History knows true examples of these from elsewhere, in many parts of the world. In Sri Lanka where the Buddhists have unmistakably been the majority group, their attitude and behaviour towards other religions has truly reflected the culture of their own. In the words of Paranavitana: "Brahmanas appear to have come to Ceylon in considerable numbers during the Cola regime. Vijayabahu I, on his accession to the throne, did not discriminate against Brahmanical forms of worship. He permitted the religious foundations of the Cola period to continue unimpaired; moreover, he also extended his patronage to new Saiva shrines that were founded in his reign..." [UHC. Vol. I. Part II. p.563].

In the light of what has been discussed so far, one cannot justifiably be precluded from viewing Duṭṭhagāmaṇī's war as a war of defence, defence of what was near and dear to him and to the people whom he had pledged to protect. And for the same reason one has to read with great caution the following remarks of Rahula: "Duṭṭhagāmaṇī seems to have exploited to the utmost all the religious and national sentiments of the masses in order to unite the people and rid his motherland of foreign rule" [HBC.p.80]. Supporting this statement of his, Rahula goes further to add: "Bhikkhus were encouraged even to leave their robes and join the army for the sake of religion and the nation." [Ibid.]. This again is an ingenious generalization based on a solitary incident. Here, his source of information is the Rasavāhinī, more of the popular tradition, evidence of which he had not reckoned with in his earlier analysis. What is even more interesting in this case is that the Mahāvamsa which has been Rahula's mainstay, records a tradition which not only does not support his thesis but runs contrary to it.

According to the Mahāvamsa [Ch.xxiii. vv. 61-63], Duṭṭha-Gāmaṇi 's general Theraputta Abhaya was not an erstwhile thera. He had the name Theraputta [i.e.son of the elder] prefixed to his own because his father, after his attainment to the state of a stream-winner [sotapatti], chose to entrust the management of the household to his son and himself become a Buddhist monk under Mahasumma thera. According to the Mahavamsa, Theraputta Abhaya was thus a householder up to the time of his being absorbed into Duṭṭha-Gāmaṇi's army as a general. Even as one leans over to take a good look at the Rasavahini account, one cannot fail to make two important observations. Firstly, at the time this young man was hand picked by Gothayimbara for Duṭṭha-Gāmaṇi's army, he was only a novitiate, i.e. sāmaṇera and not an upasaṃpanna monk who was upgraded with his higher ordination. Secondly, he was already discovered by Gothayimbara, even as a sāmaṇera to be a lad of unusual prowess and strength who even rivalled him. It is equally important not to ignore the report of the Rasavahini which gives the mitigating circumstances under which this young sāmaṇera agreed to give up temporarily his monastic career and join the army.

Goṭhayimbara recounted to him the atrocities committed by the invader in the north on the Buddhists and their religious monuments, as referred to earlier in this essay, and pointed out to him that the need of the hour was to eliminate this lawlessness in the land and provide security to the religion. It was leadership in that direction that was sought on that occasion [kālo ' yaṃ pabhunā sabbaṃ sametuṃ lokasānaṃ... Rasavahini. loc. cit].

A complete and comprehensive analysis of the traditional records of Sri Lanka relating to Duṭṭha-Gāmani's war would undoubtedly have provided a clearer and less biased view of the religio-cultural aspirations of the Sinhala people of the time. The deflected and distorted view of the Mahavamsa on this matter cannot be taken alone, by itself, to be used as a yardstick to gauge the psychology of the nation. On a closer scrutiny of the records of the Mahavamsa, one is driven to observe that at times the saner monastic tradition of historiography in Sri Lanka existed possibly outside the Mahavamsa.

Bardwell L. Smith [The Two Wheels of Dhamma, 1972, p.88ff.], apparently led up the garden path by Rahula 's observations, makes several diagnoses of the communal conflicts of Sri Lanka and writes out many apparently reassuring prescriptions. Where he wishes to deliver these is not our guess. Smith says: "While the classic encounter between Dutugemunu and Elara, the Tamil king of Ceylon, restored the monarchy to Sinhalese Buddhist hands and marked the beginnings of Sinhalese nationalism, it could not still the fears that political chaos and the forces of adhamma were ever present. The centuries separating the monk Buddhārakkhita 's complicity in the 1959 assassination of Prime Minister S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike from the assurance given by eight arahants to Duttugemunu who was distressed over slaughtering Elara's 'great host numbering millions' were symbolically spanned."

Prescribing for the amity between the Sinhalese and the Tamils in Sri Lanka, Smith further observes:

" One additional aspect of Sinhalese Buddhist identity requires noting here, namely, the indissoluble connection with its Indian roots. The very mention of the Buddha himself, Vijaya, Asoka, Mahinda and Buddhaghosa attests to Sinhalese dependence upon its continental forebears... Sinhalese Buddhist identity suffers no loss by acknowledging its brahmanic heritage, while still legitimately claiming it had chosen a different path. In which case, Tamils too might relax."

The totally confused identification herein of ' Indian roots', 'brahmanic heritage' and the Tamils reduces the whole thesis of Smith to a very lamentable position. In this twisted and tangled process of argument, we are sorry, the boot is unmistakably on the other foot.

At the commencement of this essay we did indicate the vastness of the subject that comes within our purview. What we have discussed so far, relating to Duṭṭha-Gāmani 's war, comes within the region of both history and sociology. Before we bring this study to a close it is our intention to include at least one example of a serious distortion in the interpretation of Buddhism as a religious system. This has resulted from the lack of adequate knowledge of the language in which the Buddhist texts are preserved.

It has been known and appreciated by generations of serious students of religion and philosophy that Buddhism is valued as a religion that offers the greatest degree of freedom of thought and action to the individual. However, one is not surprised to find at times a new line of thinking, no matter where it has its genesis, which challenges this uniqueness which is more often voluntarily offered to Buddhism than is claimed by it. Here is Lyn de Silva making a bold bid to contest this [Beliefs and Practices in Sri Lanka, p.196]. This is what he says:

"It is believed that the Dhamma has existed from eternity and all the Buddhas have discovered and proclaimed it to the world. `Give ear, O mendicants,' said the Buddha, `the Deathless has been found by me: I will

now instruct; I will preach the Dhamma.' Therefore the word of the Buddha is authoritative. The Buddha is the ultimate source of all true knowledge and his teaching is accepted without question. Although it is said that one should accept the Buddha's teachings only after careful investigation, authority dominates the field and there is hardly any room for autonomy of thought. As Kern says: 'Buddhism is professedly no rationalistic system, it being a superhuman (uttarimanussa) Law, founded upon the decree of an omniscient and infallible Master.' The interpretation of the Buddha's teachings is firmly and unalterably fixed in an authoritative dogmatic tradition and one dare not try to interpret the sacred writings at pleasure. It is a heresy to do so."

It is clear from the passage quoted above that it is Lyn de Silva's endeavour to establish that in Buddhism 'there is hardly any room for autonomy of thought'. Towards achieving this end, Lyn de Silva quotes Kern. Two vital observations have to be made here. One is that Kern is quoted in part here, thus presenting an entirely different context from what Kern appears to have intended. Kern's quotation does not end with the words 'infallible Master' but runs on as follows: 'infallible Master, and in such a creed mysteries are admissible.'

In fairness to Kern who wrote about Buddhism as far back as 1898, and in order that he may not be accused of things that he never intended to say, it is incumbent on us to reproduce in full Kern's remarks which precede and preface this conclusion.

'Kamma then is the link that preserves the identity of a being through all the countless changes which it undergoes in its progress through Samsara.'

Such a theory, it will be admitted, is beyond the reach of human reason, but that is no argument against its appropriateness in the original system of the creed. For Buddhism is professedly... [Kern, Indian Buddhism, p.49f.]

At the same time, with all due deference to Kern, it must also be pointed out

that Kern has completely misunderstood the term *uttari-manussa-dhamma* and has failed to translate it into English correctly. Through reasonable familiarity with Buddhist texts, any student of Buddhism [or of the Pali language] today should know that the term *dhamma* in this compound does not mean law, teaching or doctrine. It means a feature, characteristic or quality, the whole compound thus meaning a superhuman feat or attainment.

Language studies since Kern's time, particularly of Pali and Sanskrit, have advanced far enough to enable any serious researcher to adequately equip himself, without much labour, to survey his field without prejudice and preconceived notions. In this essay we have been able to highlight the not very commendable tendency of researchers to quote secondary sources in an apparent desire to extract evidence from primary sources. This can be both misleading and mischievous, the method being questionable and findings objectionable. In the face of these it may profitably be remembered that the hallmark of scholarship is not the veneration of miscreant gurus who have lost their way or the perpetuation of their heresies but the search afresh with an open mind for the discovery of truth, for the truth that leads and not mislead, creates and not destroy, enlightens and not stupefy.

From falsehood to truth lead me on from darkness to light lead me on
From death to deathless lead me on.

*Asato mam satyam gamaya Tamaso mam jyotir gamaya Mrtyor mam
amrtam gamaya.*

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